Culture, Decision Making, and Computational Modeling: Where are the Anthropologists?

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As one of the few anthropologists working for a Department of Energy national laboratory, I often get invited to discussions on the social/cultural dimensions of national security issues. Recently, I attended a meeting at which a computational physicist gave a presentation on modeling and simulation in cognitive psychology. At one point, a visitor from the intelligence community interrupted with a question, which I paraphrase here: "Would it be possible to use existing personality profiles, such as those used in law enforcement, to program an agent-based model to analyze and predict future cultural trends in another country?" My physicist friend answered with little hesitation. "If we had the right scaling laws," he said, "I don't see why not." When I demurred, a metallurgist chimed in, comparing the current state of computational social science to an earlier phase he'd witnessed in his own discipline. "In metals, we're doing things now with computers that I'd never have thought possible two decades ago," he said, implying that computational social science is on the brink of a similar capability revolution.

Presumptuous? Absolutely – but not surprising. Anthropologists haven't exactly claimed a place at the forefront of such discussions. Not only does anthropology eschew computational modeling/simulation as a research method, but it is minimally represented in the micro-debates that shape national security policy and decision making. As a result, anthropologists possess a weak understanding of the internal organizational dynamics that shape national security institutions' near obsession with problems of culture, and drive their members to seek the computational equivalent of a policy crystal ball.

The good news is that people in the military, intelligence, homeland security, and other branches of national security recognize the absence of anthropologists and are very interested in learning about how we approach the problem of culture. The bad news is that our discipline is not prepared to respond constructively to overtures from institutions such as the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, or the Central Intelligence Agency.

Indeed, many anthropologists consider the idea of constructive engagement with national security an oxymoron, if not a horrifying anathema to our ethical code. Our collective memory is long and deeply rooted in forty-year-old fiascos like Project Camelot and the Thailand Research Center. Scandals like Abu-Ghraib hardly render the idea of engagement any more appealing; neither do stories of unethical behavior on the part of government agencies during the Cold War. Recent historical research by David Price reveals how anthropologists' commitments to economic and social equality made them targets for harassment, red-baiting, and government surveillance in the early years of the Cold War (2004). And after his bizarre experience with CIA recruiters, Brooks Duncan

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warned colleagues away from ‘powerful actors who are only tenuously accountable to the public, and not at all accountable to scholarly professions’ (Duncan 1995: 11). Consequently, when anthropologists do engage national security institutions, they tend to do so from a safe distance, and usually with the intent of ethical and/or political critique.

That said, there are anthropologists who do work regularly with military, intelligence, and other national security experts. It is likely the case that readers have not heard of many of these individuals – Kerry Fosher, Brian Selmeski, Anne Irwin, Maren Tomforde, among others – since they tend to keep their heads down. Their positions within the national security establishment afford them unique ethnographic perspectives and opportunities to push the discipline in unlikely directions, toward new topical areas.

As a result, much of the current discussion around anthropological involvement in national security does not adequately reflect the diversity of work that anthropologists undertake in areas like international peacekeeping, curriculum development for military personnel, or organizational critique *within* agencies like the CIA. “Debate” in forums such as the *Anthropology News* seems to recycle the same issues, editorialized by a very few anthropologists who have taken public positions on engagement with the military or intelligence communities. The recent Gusterson-Price-Moos essays on PRISP are one example; so are Montgomery McFate’s critiques of anthropological reluctance to engage with military decision makers.

What is necessary at this point is more judicious, thoughtful discussion aimed at better integrating into the profession anthropologists who actually work in national security, defense, and other controversial areas. Not only do these anthropologists have valuable insights to offer the discipline, but they are extremely well-positioned to add nuance and balance to the crafting of national security policy. The story I relate above is a perfect example of how non-anthropological experts will fill the intellectual void created by our absence, offering decision makers “social” models, theories, and even decision support tools based on complexity mathematics or graph theory.

I am certain that there are other examples of similar shortfalls. The question remains: where are the anthropologists? Hopefully, the new AAA Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security & Intelligence Communities will provide an opening for AAA members to consider this question, so that our discipline as a whole can speak meaningfully to the trends shaping the national security and intelligence policy environment, going forward.

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